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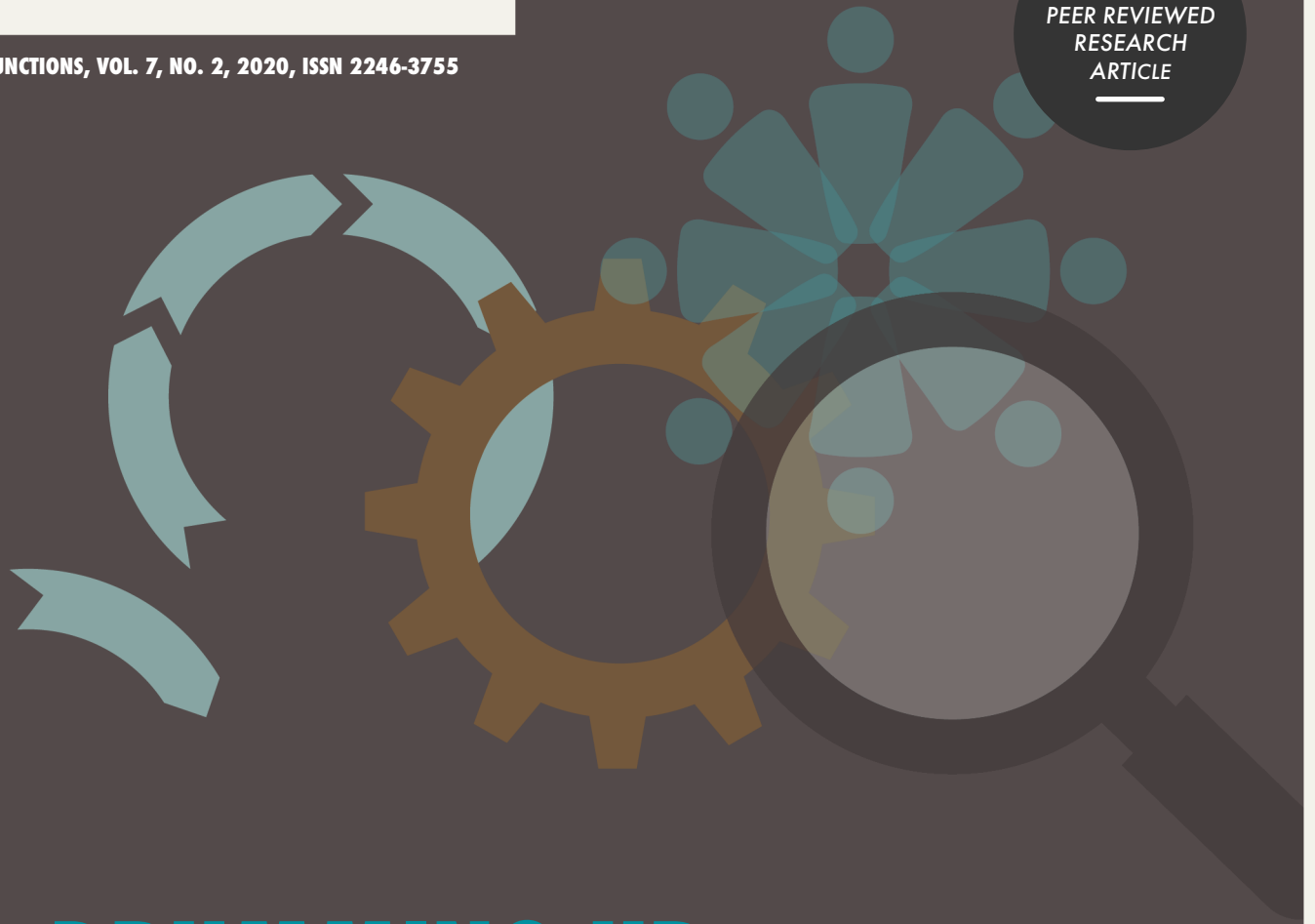
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# **DRUMMING UP AN AUDIENCE WHEN SPECTACLE BECOMES FAILURE**

**LAWRENCE BRADBY AND  
JUDITH STEWART**

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# KEYWORDS

PARTICIPATION; ART-SPECTACLE; FAILURE; PUBLIC ART; BRITISH ART SHOW; COMMUNITY

# ABSTRACT

FUNDING STREAMS DESIGNED TO ENABLE WIDER PARTICIPATION WITH CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART OFTEN FAIL TO MEET THEIR OBJECTIVES. FACED WITH THE NEED TO SHOW INCREASED ENGAGEMENT IN RETURN FOR PUBLIC FUNDING, FEAR OF FAILURE HAS LED MANY ORGANISATIONS TO TURN TO WHAT WE DESCRIBE AS THE 'ART-SPECTACLE': PUBLIC ARTWORKS DEVELOPED AS A MEANS OF DEMONSTRATING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE ENGAGEMENT WHEN LARGE CROWDS ENCOUNTER AN ART-SPECTACLE? WHEN ART-SPECTACLES APPROPRIATE AN EXISTING CULTURAL FORM AND REBRAND IT AS 'ART', BY WHAT CRITERIA CAN IT BE JUDGED A SUCCESS OR FAILURE? OUR DISCUSSION CENTRES ON *THE HISTORY TRAIN*, AN EVENT THAT FORMED PART OF BRITISH ART SHOW 8 IN NORWICH IN 2016. AS IT RECEIVED FUNDING TO ENGAGE NEW AUDIENCES, WE ASSESS *THE HISTORY TRAIN* AGAINST THE CRITERIA BY WHICH THE FUNDING WAS AWARDED. WE ALSO LOOK AT THE DEGREE TO WHICH IT MET DEBORD'S (1983) LOGIC OF SPECTACLE AND THE NECESSITY OF VISIBILITY OVER EXPERIENCE.

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**JUDITH STEWART** IS AN ARTIST, WRITER AND CURATOR. VIEWING ARTS ORGANISATIONS FROM AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE HAS LED HER TO ADDRESS QUESTIONS RELATING TO HIERARCHIES OF POWER BETWEEN CURATORS, GALLERIES AND ARTISTS. A LONGSTANDING CONCERN IS THE STATUS OF ARTISTS AS PRECARIOUS WORKERS WHEN EMPLOYED TO DELIVER PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS. SHE IS A LECTURER IN MA ARTS AND CULTURAL MANAGEMENT AT SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY AND A MEMBER OF LAND2, A CREATIVE-PRACTICE RESEARCH NETWORK.

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## Introduction

*A summer day in the city centre. The door of the Crop Shop is open and the three people waiting for their hair appointments can see the pavement and the wide road and can smell the warm air. In the bus lane just outside, six horse-drawn carts are waiting. The double decker buses are edging slowly past this unusual obstruction of horses and carts. The bus drivers, understandably cautious of this unfamiliar sight, stare as they drive past. The horses – all breeds once used for heavy farm work – seem unconcerned. The horse drivers and the accompanying grooms are dressed as if for the showground or for an agricultural fair: bowler hats, dark suits, ties with a horse motif, and calm expressions. After watching for a while from their seats in the hairdressers, one of those waiting calls to ask what this is all about. A young person, whose over-sized t-shirt with funders' logos clearly marks them as part of the event, leans in through the door and hands the questioner a small shiny flyer.*

To the organisers, this was the opening event in the British Art Show,<sup>1</sup> an exhibition that tours contemporary art to regional locations around the UK once every five years. To those waiting for their haircuts it was – well, all we know is that it was unusual enough to make them call out into the street (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1**

*The History Train on a city centre street.  
(Photo credit: Lawrence Bradby)*

This fleeting contact lies at the centre of this article where we discuss ways that such unsolicited encounters are engineered and appropriated by arts organisers and artists and presented as evidence of public participation. What can this contact represent? What types of experience do those who, like the Crop Shop's customers, witness such an event have? After two decades of debating issues relating to public participation in contemporary visual art, we take this opportunity to consider a recent shift towards what we term the 'art-spectacle' as a means of engaging the public. Our argument is based in UK contemporary visual arts but we hope that our arguments will resonate with other art forms and other systems.

In Part One we begin by outlining our understanding of the development of participatory visual

arts practices and our understanding of the term 'participation'. This necessitates discussion of the way changes in UK arts funding have impacted upon arts organisations and provides context for our critique of the 'art-spectacle', large publicly-funded visual arts events staged in public spaces. The widespread adoption of these, we suggest, often masks a failure to achieve a more meaningful public engagement.

At the heart of our argument lie what we perceive to be unequal value systems: between gallery-based art and public participatory projects, between exhibiting and participatory artists, between arts audiences and non-arts audiences. The rhetoric employed by arts organisations relating to public participation and engagement plays a significant part in maintaining these

hierarchies and we discuss how this rhetoric is often exaggerated in order to secure or justify public funding.

In Part Two these issues are examined through a case study of *The History Train*, an art-spectacle included in the 2016 British Art Show 8 (BAS8). Rather than evaluating *The History Train* as a work of art, we have considered its claims to be a participatory art project and have judged it in a more pragmatic way in order to address the following questions:

- Did *The History Train* succeed or fail as an art-spectacle?
- To what extent did it meet the criteria for participation set out by its funders?
- What are the implications of appropriating existing, popular cultural spectacles to service 'art'?

In exploring these questions we further consider whether structures that support and enable the art-spectacle create situations whereby failure becomes simultaneously inevitable and impossible.

## Part I

### Forms of Participation

The dematerialisation of the art object in the mid-twentieth century (Lippard, 1997) created a different relationship between art and its publics. Prior to this, the established view was that art was uplifting and would enable those capable of understanding it to transcend the everyday (Kant cited in Kester, 2004, p. 28). In the 1960s this, along with many other certainties, began to crumble. While critics like Michael Fried held to the view that 'authentic' works of art rejected a need to reference anything beyond their objecthood (Fried, 1967) others, like Kester (2004), argued that this significant and abrupt shift away from the art object itself led to a more temporal, shared and potentially collaborative experience. This shift from art-as-object to art-as-experience opened the way for artists to bring social forms and participation into their practice, while still showing or sharing the resulting artworks within the existing art structures (Kester, 2004).

But participation and collaboration complicates authorship (Bishop, 2012, p. 9). When the paradigm of artistic creation assumes individual genius, questions of inspiration and technique are all subsumed under the authorial name of the individual designated as artist. Once people started to take up roles inside artworks – as collaborators, actors, participants – then authorship unravels into many strands. In Shannon Jackson's terms, this draws attention to the "precarious boundaries of the aesthetic object by questioning the logic that would divide the inside of the art object from the outside of the material, institutional and social relations on which the art object relies" (2011, p. 44). Understanding authorship as shared or distributed has been a challenge for the art world (Bishop, 2012). A common approach, which avoids having to develop new ways of thinking, is to see the people involved in participatory artworks as if they were another art material: constituting the shape or texture of the work but not influencing or directing it (Kester, 2011, p. 73).

The desire for clear authorship and a heroic artist figure still frames the infrastructure for visual art. It is made evident by who receives commissions, by what work is selected for exhibition, by what receives critical validation and in how art is directed at its differing publics (Bradby & Stewart, 2017). But to justify public funding, arts organisations must demonstrate their ability to engage a wider socio-economic audience than currently engage in the arts. This has resulted in adopting a narrative of success that simultaneously overstates the impact of art and overlooks its potential. We have seen this for many years from Arts Council England (ACE), galleries and organisers of major cultural events, as the language of 'transformation' became embedded in aims and funding criteria (ACE, 2003, 2018). Rather than supporting and reshaping the structures by which culture is created and shared, the planning begins with an idea of the big finish, the citywide artwork, the equivalent of a high-wire act. In spite of its numerous critics (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010; Bianchini et al., 2019; Hope, 2017; Jancovich, 2017), this language is still with us. But not *all* audiences need to have their lives transformed; only those who are deemed to be lacking or deficient in culture

(Miles & Gibson, 2016; Scott, 2008). As ACE remains a major source of funding for visual arts organisations and events, curators and artists have grown adept at presenting their work as transformational and life-changing.

The involvement of non-artists in an artwork's creation doesn't necessarily make it more meaningful or transformational or necessarily broaden its appeal. Sophie Hope (2017), quoting Braden, has highlighted "the conflict between the notion of popularising art and the notion of artistic democracy" (Braden, 1978). In other words, the distinction between an approach that is democratic and inclusive (involving all those who wish to take part and ensuring participants have the agency to determine the work's development), and an approach that drums up an audience for something that already exists.

Since the start of the New Labour years (1997), arts and culture have seen first expanded investment and then contraction and marketisation. Despite these funding changes, audiences for visual art have remained largely unchanged. The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) survey of 2011 showed that the engagement of a broad social constituency was not being realised in the subsidised arts; despite the efforts of ACE, arts organisations, and artists, audiences for visual art remained predominantly white and middle-class (The Warwick Commission, 2015). Although the reasons preventing engagement with subsidised arts were evidenced, rather than restructure the way funding was allocated, ACE continued to fund the same organisations. According to Jancovich (2017), the majority of organisations being asked to widen involvement in the arts had little commitment to fulfilling this mission. The increased financial pressures on arts organisations to demonstrate value for money appears to have led many to prioritise the *number* of people counted as 'engaged' over the *form* of that engagement. And what better way to increase numbers than the art-spectacle.

## The art-spectacle

Our use of the term 'art-spectacle' draws on the legacy of Situationist ideas. For Guy Debord, spectacle means a way of organising society in which all experience that was once "directly lived has receded into a representation" (1983, p. 2). Debord's concerns were broad: consumerism, capitalism and culture as commodity. He saw spectacle as the operation of an image-based mass media, stressing that images comprise the form, not the content: "the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (1983, p. 2). Therefore, in the art-spectacle, when images are used to create and support a narrative of participation based on chance encounters, we see images mediating social relations.

The art-spectacles discussed in this article are large publicly-funded events staged in public spaces. They rely on the quality of 'liveness' (Auslander, 1999, p. 2), because they require spectators, yet they are also characterised by the passive role of the audience. Art-spectacles are distinct from events where there are opportunities for anyone to join in (e.g. Notting Hill Carnival), and from events planned and delivered by a community or collaborative group of artists (e.g. Liberate Tate's *The Gift* (2012)) where, although a 'closed' group, each member can influence the event. In the art-spectacle, participation is controlled by the artist or curator and, although there may be some dramatic element to it, the key features are that it occupies space, has an audience, and presents adequate opportunities for vivid photographs depicting public enjoyment.

While various types of commissioners and host organisations develop art-spectacles, all rely to a greater or lesser degree on public funding. Examples are: Carsten Holler's *Test Site* (2006), hosted by Tate Modern; Chris Bullzini's high wire walk over the River Wear for the Tall Ships Sunderland event; Spencer Tunick's *Sea of Hull* (2016) for Hull UK City of Culture; Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfalls* (2008) in Central Park; and Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (2010), performed at various galleries including MOMA New York and the Serpentine, London. Our case study, Alan Kane's *The History Train*, produced for BAS8, is another.

Google any item from this list of art-spectacles and the thumbnail images will have you scrolling a long way down before the results fall wide of your search term. To quote Debord: "'What appears is good; what is good appears.' The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply" (1983, p. 4). The long after-glow of images, created by arts organisations and funders to provide evidence of public 'participation', is the function of the art-spectacle. Because public funding needs tangible illustrations of success, the possibility of divergent or unplanned outcomes is specifically excluded from both the planning of the event, and from the discourse around it. Taking our cue from Kester's (2004) definition of participation as a form of dialogical aesthetics, we define participation as

a relationship between artist and participants that provides opportunities for co-authorship: where all participants have some agency. When it comes to staging art-spectacles, artists and the organisations promoting them need control over the direction and form of the project and cannot admit the risk-taking and the unpredictability that comes with participatory practices.

We have noted elsewhere (Bradby & Stewart, 2017) the language repeatedly used by arts organisations to reassure audiences, critics and funding bodies that their exhibition programmes are invariably excellent and Bianchini et al. (2019) has similarly commented on the “risks of hype”, “circuits of self-legitimation”, and the “marginalisation of dissent”. The measure of an artist’s or artwork’s success depends not on identifiable qualities, but on where it is staged, exhibited or published, and whether it will continue to be promoted through critical acclaim and continuing public exposure. This discourse runs a limited but influential circuit. The language that attends publicly-funded art-spectacles vouchsafes both the popularity of the event and its capacity to engage the public more effectively than other forms of exhibition.

But what is the nature of this engagement? As an event that disrupts the everyday in an interesting, exciting, or pleasurable way, and measured against Debord’s logic of spectacle, art-spectacles can be successful. However, if their aim is to meet criteria of participation and engagement, are they not failures? Could it be argued that the language and organisational structures that support and enable the art-spectacle create a set of criteria by which failure becomes both inevitable and impossible? To answer these questions we turn to *The History Train*.

## Part 2

### The British Art Show 8 and *The History Train*

The British Art Show (BAS) was initiated in 1979 by the Arts Council of Great Britain as a touring equivalent to the Hayward Annual show, with an emphasis on “the contemporary and the controversial” (Hayward Touring, 2016), and takes place every five years. BAS is accompanied by the rhetoric of ‘success’ outlined earlier, its press releases stating that it brings “the best of British contemporary art to the regions” (Hayward Touring, 2015).

In accordance with previous iterations, BAS8 toured to four UK cities between 2015 and 2016: Leeds, Edinburgh, Norwich and Southampton. Curated by Anna Colin and Lydia Yee, BAS8 consisted of over 100 works by 42 artists, providing an “overview of the most exciting contemporary art produced in this country” (Hayward Touring, 2016).

*The History Train* launched BAS8 in Norwich city centre on 18 June 2016. It was developed by artist Alan Kane for BAS8 in partnership with Norfolk Museums Service (NMS), with particular involvement from Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery’s (NCMAG) curator of contemporary art, and the Farm Manager at Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse Museum (part of NMS). Drawing on a Norwich tradition of heavy horse parades from the early years of the 20th century, Kane proposed delivering the works of art for BAS8 by horse and cart. *The History Train* “...was conceived to combine vivid spectacle with a practical purpose, raising fundamental questions about the nature of art and audience engagement as well as providing a memorable public occasion” (NMS, 2016).

### Methodology

One of the authors of this paper, a freelance artist, was appointed to the fixed-term, part-time role of BAS8 City Co-ordinator, Norwich. As the project progressed, the co-author acted as a sounding-board and critical friend to consider the issues faced in delivering a public programme. The decision to turn this experience into a case study was informed by previous extensive experience of delivering public programmes as artists and curators, where our primary interests as researchers have been to challenge institutional structures and rhetoric that protect existing “power imbalances, unequal distribution of cultural authority in society, and unequal access to the means of symbolic representation and meaning-making” (Belfiore, 2018, p. 384). Our



auto-ethnographic approach offered a pragmatic way to pursue research that is not part of the job description and is carried out in the gaps between the official duties (Muncey, 2010, p. 34). We have drawn on memory, notebooks and email exchanges from the time. We acknowledge that our views offer a partial perspective and that other interpretations of BAS8 and *The History Train* exist that challenge or contradict our own experience, but ours is a perspective often ignored by the celebratory narratives told of such programmes.

One of Bradby's many tasks as BAS8 City Co-ordinator was overseeing the public participation stages of *The History Train*, which allowed us insights into some of the behind-the-scenes aspects of BAS8's participatory programme in Norwich. Because our article depends on conveying Bradby's lived experience of working on BAS8, we have carefully considered how we use his insider knowledge. Anonymity is rarely associated with high profile visual art projects. For this reason we refer by name to the lead artist of *The History Train* but where possible we have referred to institutions rather than individuals and direct references are based on publicly available sources or permissible communications. Clearly there are some areas where our only source is Bradby's experience and where this is the case, we have made this explicit.

## Putting up the tent

Norwich is a small city (population 140,000 (ONS, 2019)) in a rural county. Despite the efforts of some artists, the hinterland of Norwich has little infrastructure to support contemporary visual art and the many artists living in the region. Previous attempts to put Norwich on the cultural map had resulted in (unsuccessful) bids to become UK City of Culture in 2008 and 2013. In 2012 it became the first English city to be awarded Unesco City of Literature status. For artists and art enthusiasts in the East, the prospect of BAS8 coming to Norwich signalled the possibility of new beginnings. Norwich University of the Arts (NUA) and NCMAG were keen to "reaffirm the commitment of the university, Norwich Castle and the city to supporting creative excellence by hosting cutting-edge contemporary shows" (Powell, 2016), and led the bid for BAS8 in partnership with Norwich City Council and the Norwich Business Improvement District.

BAS8 artists were announced in 2015 and Alan Kane began preparing *The History Train* almost a year before Bradby was appointed as City Co-ordinator in March 2016. In describing his project, Kane used the term 'service art', saying "I saw the work as being something that would serve a functional purpose" (NUA, 2016). His intention was to use this 'service art' as a way of celebrating "...the very newest art from Britain by delivering it in one of the most traditional and spectacular ways imaginable". He described it as bringing together art history and transport history (Kane, 2016). For NCMAG the idea also had the advantage of involving non-artists in the shape of horse owners, drivers and handlers. These people would bring their expertise, essential to the overall project, and their horses would provide the visual impact essential for an art-spectacle. From Bradby's understanding, in its original conception, the role of the horse owners, drivers and handlers was tightly proscribed: there was apparently no space for them to contribute their experience of how horse parades can be run, to discuss the decisions that shaped the final event, nor even to meet the artist more than once or twice. Since the purpose of *The History Train* was to assemble a brief spectacle under the authorial banner of an artist's name, the organisational approach is unsurprising. However this initial project structure was put under considerable pressure by additional funding.

In 2015, for the first time in its history, BAS had secured an additional grant from ACE's Strategic Touring Fund (STF). The grant was specifically to ensure that host venues would "reach and retain new audiences with a wider geographical spread and wider profile of visitors" (Hayward Touring, 2016, p. 2). Other aims for the STF grant were for venues to "develop their relationships with local communities" and "address the mental barriers to participation". Meanwhile artists would "orchestrate transformative experiences for people from least-engaged communities" with participants in these creative projects making "the physical, psychological and emotional link back to the venues." The Hayward itself would use the STF funding to "develop a model of audience development for touring major visual art exhibitions" (Hayward Touring, 2016, p. 2). The artists and cultural administrators, including Bradby, wrestled with their good fortune; at different times struggling either to meet or to evade the conditions that accompanied the funding.

The STF aims were partly met through the employment of artists and artists' groups based in the region who delivered low-profile projects working with local communities and groups. This model of 'socially-engaged' contemporary art practice



is conventionally understood by those of us working in this field or documenting it as ‘artist-led, non-object-based encounters, performances and collaborations with others’ (Hope, 2017, p. 203). These artists and artists’ groups were known, for BAS8 purposes, as Ambassadors.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the Ambassadors, two of the artists selected back in April 2015 for gallery exhibition within BAS8, Alan Kane and Jessica Warboys, were earmarked to develop work addressing STF criteria. Both artists’ contributions to the BAS8 gallery exhibition had already been agreed with curators, so the STF work was additional to their original proposals. For Bradby as City Co-ordinator, this was problematic. While the Ambassadors were experienced in developing work that involved participants, Kane and Warboys were not, and it soon transpired that the term ‘participant’ was subject to different interpretations.

*The History Train* was not unusual in requiring the active presence and expertise of various associates, deputies, helpers, assistants and participants in order for the core idea to be realised, some of whom required remuneration. All the projects in our earlier list of art-spectacles ‘deploy people in space’ (a phrase used to describe *The History Train*) to achieve their effects. The participants in these art-spectacles are interchangeable. The issue of whether payment cancels their status as participants, as recorded by Malik-Onkon (2007) in relation to *Margate Mementos*, remains problematic.

An additional actor in the distribution and application of the STF funding was the National Coordinator for BAS8. Unlike staff at Hayward Touring and host venues, who were mostly in more secure contracts, this post was temporary. On taking up his appointment, Bradby found that the National Coordinator was not only concerned that *The History Train* would fail to “orchestrate transformative experiences for people from least-engaged communities” as the funding specified, but was actively avoiding this task. The issue hinged on interpretations of the criteria. NCMAG staff felt that *The History Train*’s original proposal already met STF criteria for community participation. As one curator explained to Bradby, Kane had been asked to devise a project that involved people in an authentic way and further adjustments were unnecessary (Bradby, 2016). However, on advice from the National Coordinator, Hayward Touring withheld a portion of the STF funds which were not released until late May 2016, less than three weeks before *The History Train* took place.

*The History Train* was one of “the Creative Outreach Programmes” nominated by the curators of BAS8 to engage communities to work directly with world-class artists (Hayward Touring, 2016, p. 4), and Bradby was expected to find ways to meet this expectation. As the heavy horse owners and handlers were being paid for their involvement, the National Coordinator and Hayward Touring did not regard them as “new and broader communities”.

For Bradby, the task of re-directing *The History Train* was not easy. The artist’s brief had taken the form of a verbal agreement and planning decisions were made by a few key people and shared intermittently by email. Through March and April 2016, as the financial stand-off between Hayward and the Norwich partners continued, there were more of what Bradby called ‘ret-ro-fixes’ and ‘belated bolt-ons’ designed to draw in “the public” from “areas of low engagement”. None of these resulted in generous or enthusiastic responses, probably, Bradby suspected, because what was offered was neither generous nor genuine.



**Figure 2**

*The horse brasses*

(Photo credit: Katherine Mager)

Just prior to Bradby’s appointment in March 2016, in an attempt to satisfy the Hayward’s conditions for releasing the funds, a call went out via the Great Yarmouth Gazette and the NCMAG mailing list for the public to submit designs for horse brasses. This yielded twenty-six submissions, which were manufactured by Kane and a NUA technician, and worn

by the horses during the parade (Fig. 2). When the number of participants in a project is small, it is not unreasonable to expect a correspondingly higher level of involvement. In spite of the rhetoric of participation surrounding the publicity and evaluations

of *The History Train*, the designers' contact with the project was minimal. NCMAG sent an email acknowledging receipt of the design and inviting designers to attend the procession where, it said, they would be able to meet Alan Kane and see their horse brasses being worn.



**Figure 3**

*The trolley, made by one of the ambassador projects, transporting the horse brasses to NCMAG. (Photo credit: Lawrence Bradby)*

The brasses were later transported in their own trolley (Fig. 3) like a poor relation to the Castle Museum where they were placed on display in the Fitch Room (Fig. 4), a small room housing a mineralogy display. While inclusion in NCMAG afforded some recognition of the brasses, the decision to show them separately from the BAS8 exhibition gave them the

status of orphaned objects whose proximity might compromise the artist's authorial integrity. In spite of this deliberate distancing, in all of the BAS8 evaluations and reports there were numerous references to the horse brasses as a "significant part of the event" cited as proof (like the 15,000 spectators) of the local population's involvement with BAS8 (NMS, 2016).



**Figure 4**

*The brasses being accessioned into the Fitch Room. (Photo Credit: Katherine Mager)*

Not only does this lead us to question whether the horse brasses can be regarded as meeting the STF criteria, but the failure to involve the designers in their production created additional problems. As the volunteer designers had no understanding of the forging processes required, most designs could not be made without alteration. Although the acknowledgement email had warned that the "brasses won't be



exact replicas of the submitted drawing" (Bradby, 2016), these changes were not discussed with the designers. Consequently, when they first saw the brasses made from their designs on the day of the parade, some expressed surprise and confusion. One designer, extremely angry that their design had been changed beyond recognition, demanded that their work be removed from the display in NCMAG.

## Human Material

Rather than embracing practices made possible by the dematerialisation of the art object – privileging dialogue, building relationships, and engaging with lived experiences – the art-spectacle treats participants as additional material for the visual legacy. Instead of the dialogical exchange between artist and participants that Kester (2004) shows is possible, *The History Train* used the City Co-ordinator as a go-between to realise the artist's vision. As the day of the event approached, Bradby received a flurry of requests from the artist, via the NCMAG curator, that illustrate the status of participants as visual material. One was to provide, from memory, the measurements of all the heavy horse owners so the artist could dress them in long grey warehouseman's jackets. This overlooked the horse owners' own performed traditions of wearing show outfits consisting of stiff jackets and bowler hats. Another request was to find 'a little drummer boy, a scout or something' to go at the head of the procession (Bradby, 2016).

Jackson (2011) observes that practices like *The History Train* fail to provide the space to properly interrogate their success or failure. The comments of BAS8 Ambassador artists we contacted, who spoke about lack of time, lack of appropriate support, being 'add-ons' to the main programme, and lack of consultation – all familiar complaints to anyone working in this field of practice – are missing from the evaluation of the programme. There are also questions to be asked about the expectations placed upon those working in roles like those of the City and the National Co-ordinators. As we have argued elsewhere, employed on precarious contracts, with little autonomy, such roles seem doomed to failure from the start (Bradby & Stewart, 2017).

The fleeting nature of these roles and the job insecurity associated with them means that there are few voices prepared to disrupt the narrative of success. In spite of the problems faced by the artist and organisers, press releases continued to present *The History Train* as a "unique" and "spectacular" event, providing opportunities for "everyone in the region to experience a major national touring exhibition" (Powell, 2016). Accounts of the 'participatory' aspects of *The History Train* exaggerated the involvement of the designers and elevated the horse brasses to "a significant part of the event" (NMS, 2016), a description at odds with Bradby's view of them as an add-on activity. The ending of Bradby's contract before evaluations were written gave him little opportunity to contribute to these evaluations.

This disconnect between the claims made for participation and the reality is what, in our experience, contributes to a failure of organisations to address these continuing problems and often leads to participants' sense of disappointment. Participation in *The History Train* can be summed up as: designing brasses, attending the parade and taking a small role in the accessioning of the brasses into NCMAG. While some designers did meet the artist at the parade, neither Kane nor the Hayward Touring team attended the accessioning of the brasses in the Fitch Room.

Interestingly, it was not only the participatory elements of *The History Train* that were exaggerated; it was also evident in the realisation of the concept itself. Early in its planning stage, the Hayward curators vetoed horse-drawn transport of the exhibition's artworks: the artworks were too valuable and fragile to risk transporting them on carts with wooden wheels. Without any art to carry, *The History Train* ceased to be a piece of 'service art'. Yet rather than being re-shaped or choosing to acknowledge the contingencies of doing familiar things in unusual ways, *The History Train* faltered onwards with its outward form unchanged. In all of its publicity, documentation and evaluation the project was spoken of as "delivering artwork", but the crates were empty. The dangers attached to this becoming public were acknowledged in an email Bradby received in April:

"One thing we all need to be mindful of is being so open about the crates being 'empty'. For the purposes of the public and the team we need to agree that they will contain 'supplementary material' albeit very light things... we could have a PR situation on our hands if people know they are in fact empty" (Bradby, 2016).

## Roll up! Roll Up! The logic of spectacle

So according to both our definition of participation as co-authorship and the STF criteria of building new audiences for the arts, the horse brasses element of *The History Train* failed. But does its quality as art-spectacle redress the balance? We have suggested that the increasing prevalence of art-spectacles is driven by the desire to boost audiences and to create a legacy of visual evidence of public participation and enjoyment. Audience figures can be based upon the numbers who consciously engage with work, or they can be an estimate of those who have simply shared the same physical space. This has long been a problem for those of us satisfying ACE's requests for estimates of potential audiences when the art is destined for public spaces.

On sunny Saturday afternoons, Norwich is always busy and anything out of the ordinary will attract attention. Evaluations of BAS8 (NMS, 2016) state that *The History Train* was "seen by an estimated 15,000", yet no evidence is provided for how this estimate was arrived at, nor is there any attempt to evaluate the nature of this experience. So what proportion of these 15,000 who turned to look at the horses and carts were, as was claimed, "experiencing" a major national touring exhibition (Powell, 2016)?

For Debord, these passive participants are a necessary ingredient for spectacle. For us, the definition of 'participant' is less important than the nature of the participation and the ways that arts organisations use participation as a lever for securing additional funding.

The unspoken assumption that some groups are more in need of participating than others also needs further questioning.

The values ascribed to particular cultural forms (Bennett, 2009; Stevenson, 2017) are reflected in the distribution of funds (ACE, 2018). Engaging participants from 'correct' demographics in order to justify public funding does little to challenge the hierarchies of cultural capital. The majority of public and participatory art projects perpetuate the reigning ideology that many people suffer from a 'lack' that should be filled by the right kind of culture (Miles & Sullivan, 2012). The Hayward's rejection of the horse owners and handlers as participants demonstrates this: being skilled and confident, they were not sufficiently lacking. Besides overlooking the reality that most people already participate in a range of cultural activities (Bennett, 2009; Miles & Sullivan, 2012), this deficit model relies on two assumptions: 1) that people need the help of artists/cultural professionals; and 2) artists/cultural professionals have a surfeit of abilities and understanding. As Scott noted in relation to Eliasson's *Waterfall* installation in New York:

"Eliasson has a job to do, and part of this job is about exposing the perceptual lack in his prospective audience" (Scott, 2008).

In accepting Scott's argument it becomes easier to see the link between art-spectacle as participation and participatory practices as we understand them. The language surrounding these might have changed over the past two or three decades, but the underlying assumptions remain. With "two of the most important factors influencing whether somebody attends or participates in arts and cultural activities [being] educational attainment and socio-economic background" (Consilium, 2018), attempts to engage 'hard to reach' audiences not only ignore the socio-economic causes of disengagement, but also the cultural activities already enjoyed by these potential audiences. In other words, they do not *lack* culture; they just have the wrong sort (Miles & Sullivan, 2012).

It is awkward for those of us invested in contemporary art in all its forms (especially if we believe that the arts should be publicly-funded) to acknowledge that our assumptions are entwined with paternalistic and hierarchical value systems. While we point the finger at funding bodies for the problems faced (lack of time, lack of support), we must recognise our own complicity in maintaining the status quo. As Jelinek (2013) has noted, the art world is sustained by arts professionals; we all police the boundaries of what is and isn't art (p. 44). During BAS8, Bradby, caught between artist, curator and participants, found himself questioning his own priorities. An example of this was cited in relation to the horse brass designs where one submission consisted of highly detailed biro drawings of dark domestic interiors, unsuitable for brasses but in themselves pointing at something potentially more interesting. In failing to follow up and engage with this person, Bradby felt complicit in prioritising the art-spectacle above engagement.

The existence of funding streams such as the STF indicate, by their very existence, that mainstream contemporary art neither engages nor interests large sections of the population. If one measure of success is the number of people engaged, it is failing. Instead of accepting this and acknowledging that most people have their own forms of cultural engagement, the funding

system encourages (and sometimes demands) that people experience and enjoy the contemporary art they are given when it descends upon their city or town. At the very least, arts organisations and artists must make it *appear* that their efforts have been appreciated in order to avoid any suggestion of failure.

Artists and arts organisations have failed for many years to find effective and reliable ways to engage ‘hard to reach’ citizens or to find effective ways of measuring the long-term impact that exposure or participation has had upon individuals or communities. A trend towards art-spectacles indicates a “shift in the way we think about those who come and see art, a shift away from ‘individuals’ and toward ‘audiences’”. The idea of the ‘show’ has taken the place of the individual gaze” (Bonami cited in Hughes, 2005, p. 36). As Louise Yates (2019) observed: the barriers to art disappear when it becomes entertainment. But if art is merely entertainment, why should it be treated differently to other forms of entertainment that require little or no public funding?

*The History Train* provides an example of another strategy for engaging a disinterested public: the tendency of art-spectacles to appropriate other cultural forms. Could this tendency be regarded as another instance of the failure of public art to engage viewers on art’s own terms? *The History Train*, offering the spectacle of heavy horses transporting crates through the city, provided shoppers in Norwich with a glimpse of what they can already witness at agricultural shows and fairs every summer – there’s even an annual parade not far from Norwich in Downham Market. For the owners of the heavy horses *The History Train* was just another show event, but in a city centre, and with no rosettes. So if artworks that combine spectacle and participation merely mirror events or experiences that can be accessed outside of an art context, should we be asking why such artworks are needed? Or, to put it another way, what is added to these activities by designating them as *art*?

Bennett’s (2009) reassessment of Bourdieu’s 1986 analysis of class and cultural engagement confirmed that socio-economic factors still influence cultural preferences and that a hierarchy of values is assigned to different cultural activities. Having failed to convince the majority to appreciate contemporary art on its own terms, arts organisations are now drawing popular culture under the umbrella of art and assigning it different values. Such appropriations are not done in order to value popular culture in itself but, to use the term applied to *The History Train*, to service the art world. In creating a spectacle that attracts audiences in greater numbers, perhaps the real purpose is to create a sense of legitimacy for artists and galleries. It could also be a way for some “metrocultuals” and “commuterland culture buffs” (ACE, 2020) to experience ‘ordinary’ culture while accumulating cultural capital.

BAS8 organisers *wanted* the residents of Norwich to feel part of a significant event, but for us, participation should imply agency. BAS8 happened to Norwich but like other such events, it was *given*, raising the question of who has the authority to bid for such events? The intentions for *The History Train* clearly voiced a desire to engage the wider community but, measured against Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (1969), it is clear that participants failed to climb beyond the lowest two rungs. The failure to encourage meaningful participation left *The History Train* trapped in the logic of spectacle and the necessity of visibility over experience.

## Masking Failure: Little Drummer Boys and Girls...

For us, none of the public involvement with *The History Train* meets the criteria for participation. The horse brasses are an example of “attendant creativity”, a term we devised to describe creativity which is intentionally put in a subordinate position. These creative acts are allowed to take place because someone of a higher status, in this case a BAS8 artist, created a gap which participants may fill but may not transgress. While the public was invited to design the brasses, and their subsequent display provided visibility and acknowledgment of their creative work, they were not afforded any agency. In Kester’s terms *The History Train* remained “rooted in conventional paradigms of authorial sovereignty and pedagogical hierarchy” (2011, p. 4). Not allowing participants’ work or ideas to pervade or alter the form of an artwork in any way is a problem Shannon Jackson says is not unusual with participatory practices. The worry for the high status artist inviting people into their artwork is that it will become “beholden to the ‘external rules’ of the social” and thus no longer “capable of extracting itself from social claims long enough to take a properly critical or interrogative stance” (Jackson, 2011, p. 29).

We began by asking what the nature of engagement with art-spectacles might be. In relation to Debord’s logic of spectacle,

it is clear that *The History Train* was a success: it attracted attention, it provided advance warning to Norwich of the arrival of BAS8 and, importantly, it provided a vital legacy of mediated images in the form of promotional videos and photographs. The accompanying narrative took a common cultural event (a horse parade) and, deploying language that distanced it from its normal participants, re-framed it into an art-spectacle that “stimulates the citizen to withdraw into a world of make-believe” (Rousseau cited in Lutticken, 2008, p. 64). Two elements from *The History Train* support this argument: the fact the crates had no artworks, and the fact this was never publicly acknowledged.

However, when we consider *The History Train* in terms of participation, it becomes evident that it failed both in terms of the specific funding criteria and in terms of our understanding of participation. The role of people in bringing art-spectacles to life is essential: no audience, no spectacle. But whether accidental encounters can be considered (and counted) as ‘participation’ is questionable. Even if we acknowledge that others might view participation differently, it is hard to find ways in which *The History Train* fulfilled STF funding criteria of building and sustaining new audiences. As so often happens with participatory projects, community involvement ended when the show moved on.

The three questions we started with fed into a broader question about whether the language and organisational structures that support and enable the art-spectacle create a set of criteria by which failure becomes simultaneously inevitable and impossible. There are a number of issues here. We discussed the importance of demonstrating public value in return for public funds, but there is also a more complicated issue. The funding structure for the visual arts privileges particular types of practice, artists and organisations and is based on deeply-held beliefs that creativity is the result of individual vision and sensibility rather than something dialogical that develops from interactions with the world around us. Our interpretation of genuine participation challenges this model; it raises ethical questions concerning authorship, who are the real beneficiaries, and the nature of any gains accumulated. At the very least it is arguable that prioritising visibility over experience through the art-spectacle brings more and lasting benefits to curators, artists and their institutions through enhanced professional profiles than it does to passive audiences and attendant creatives.

These structures are what make failure inevitable and, again, it is language that sets the trap. *The History Train* provided numerous examples of Belfiore’s inflated rhetoric (2018) in the funding criteria, which encourage exaggerated narratives of individual and social impact. For what organisation will risk acknowledging that the impact on target communities was very small?



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## Endnotes

- 1 See <http://www.britishartshow8.com/blog/long-read-history-british-art-show-1591>
- 2 The Ambassadors in Norwich were: Eyebrow Arts, Common Ground (Courtney Burley and Paige Lyons), Jevan Watkins Jones & Earlham Nursery School, Original Projects, Liz Ballard & Men's Shed, Mancroft Advice Project.